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SUBJECT: AFGHAN REPUBLICAN PARTY EMBRACES KARZAI'S AGENDA

¶1. The Afghan Republican Party celebrated its 10-year anniversary this week with a national conference in Kabul, where party leaders made it clear they intend to serve among President Karzai's most reliable supporters in next year's election even though Karzai has said he does not intend to form, sponsor or join a political party of his own. Although few elected officials, if any, fully identify as Republican Party members, the party leadership does include Karzai's chief of policy, Sebghatullah Sanjar, as well as a handful of former high-ranking government officials. The party has fought for Karzai's attention against the similarly named Republic Party and a host of independents loyal to the president. With less than a year left before the presidential election, the Republicans are crafting a political message closely in tune with Karzai's policies.

¶2. At this week's party conference, speakers represented a diverse cross-section of Afghan society: men, women, traditional, Westernized, Tajik, Hazara, Pashtun, young, and old spoke to several hundred members in a Kabul hotel banquet room. In addition to Sanjar, speakers and others prominently featured during the ceremonies included a Sikh, a mullah, a former Cabinet official, and the head of the Afghan Para-Olympic Team. Many of the speakers referenced the ongoing Saudi Arabia-hosted reconciliation talks with the Taliban. While other political groups have expressed skepticism, Sanjar and others praised Karzai's efforts and said they were confident such negotiations would only bring in those insurgents willing to respect the Constitution. Pictures of Karzai adorned the walls of the conference room alongside party banners.

¶3. Sanjar has used his position inside the Palace and connections with the business communities in Kabul and Herat to build the organization of what has been a very minor player in Afghan politics. This week's conference, attended by more than 300 members and their families, was one of the largest gatherings in the party's history. Party members tell us they hope to win several seats in Parliament in the 2010 elections and convince incumbent MPs to join their party. With the resources on display at the conference, they should be able to make some progress toward these goals. As a pan-ethnic, geographically diverse party, they may be ahead of their time. Regional and ethnic blocs leftover from mujahideen times, however, are still best positioned to attract the most votes, even though many of those parties have not made similar efforts to organize and prepare for the next legislative elections.

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